



Legacy on the River

By Elishia Ballentine, Editor

As the Tombigbee winds its way through the river valley of present-day Marengo County, the waters are quiet, not giving a hint of the past. But the history of this area is as rich as the black soil along the banks. Before the first Europeans arrived, it was inhabited by Indians who cultivated great fields of maize. Then around 1540, Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto and his soldiers marched through . . . life would never be the same for the Choctaws along the river. In the early 18th century, further upstream, the French built Fort

Tombeche and battled with the Chickasaws and British. A few years later, the first white settlers to the area were expatriates from France. Where the Black Warrior merges with the Tombigbee – in what is now the city of Demopolis – these Napoleon sympathizers formed the “vine and olive colony.” At about the same time, in 1817, just a ways down river St. Stephens became the first capital of the Alabama territory.

While the third generation of the Tutt family now caring for this rich bottomland along the river respects the great history of the region, they’re much more

interested in the future. The three brothers who inherited the property – Walter, Webb, and Wallace Tutt – are intent on handing it down “even better” for the fourth generation and those that follow. This idea of “leaving it better than they found it” was one of the values instilled in them by their father and mother. It’s this motivation that drives them to constantly make improvements on the land, and incidentally led to winning the *Helene Mosley Memorial Award* for the Southwest Region in 2004.

Their grandfather, who owned a saw mill in the area, originally bought the



Growing up, the Tutt brothers enjoyed spending time at “Barney’s Upper” (Landing) on the Tombigbee River. Both Walter and Webb (above) still live in Marengo County, while brother Wallace now lives in Florida.

Photos by Elishia Ballentine

land along the river in the 1950s. At that time there were a few pines, but it was mostly hardwoods, cattle pasture, and open row crops of cotton and corn. Changes began in the 1980s when the Tutts actively started developing the property by planting loblolly pines in different successions. The oldest plantations are approaching 28 to 30 years of age, while others are in the 12- to 14-year-old range. Walter Tutt, who has taken more of a “hands-on” role in the management of the property and timber business, said the plan was to execute a 35-year rotation with two or three thinnings, then

harvest and reforestation. However, they’ve already been forced to salvage some damaged timber in the wake of tornadoes as well as Hurricanes Ivan and Katrina.

A lot of the hardwood bottomland is still fairly young. Walter stated that much of it was high graded in previous years, so they are now trying to harvest some of the lower grade species and allow natural regeneration to take hold.

The brothers practice what they preach: after any harvest, they make sure to leave the forest as good, if not better, than before, providing streamside man-

agement zones (SMZs). They carry out road maintenance primarily in the fall, making improvements with dozer and motor grade equipment, installing culverts, and building bridges. In recent years they’ve also tried planting longleaf seedlings to see if they will be as successful as the loblolly.

Over time, the Tutts have acquired more land and now own a little more than 1,200 acres, divided into four parcels. However, it’s this original parcel on the river that is held most dear to the whole family. Growing up in the nearby community of Nanafalia (pronounced nan-ah-fah-LYE-yah), the three brothers always loved going there, whether to find an outdoor adventure or just get away from the world for a while. Now they bring their kids out here where it’s safe to let them wander around and roam all over the woods. It has sort of become a family tradition for a Tutt to take his or her first buck at “Barney’s Upper” – the property still bears the name of a boat landing from earlier era.

Although this TREASURE Forest is primarily managed for timber, wildlife is their secondary objective, and these brothers believe the two go hand in hand. According to Webb Tutt, the wildlife has always been exceptional here, and good “quality” hunting is another legacy they want to leave their children – an appreciation of what a sportsman is all about.

In addition to an abundance of deer, there’s also a variety of other game: turkey, squirrels, rabbits, and wild hogs. The river and the lay of the land contribute to this rich diversity of wildlife; however, the brothers are constantly “micro-managing” to improve on what nature has given them. Each year they plant about ten grazing food plots in the winter and provide supplemental feeding in the summer. For deer they create browse and fertilize native honeysuckle; for turkey, they create nesting habitat and plant chufas. Other practices include planting fruit trees (mostly crabapples) and Chinese chestnuts; collecting soil samples before planting food plots, then liming and fertilizing properly; planting millet in dove fields; and using goats to control privet and kudzu. If only they could control the wild hog population – the one animal of which there are too many. Both Webb and Walter voiced

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(Left:) One of the prolific crabapple trees planted for wildlife. (Above:) Some of the younger hardwoods near the river.

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their dismay regarding the damage and challenges arising from this problem.

The brothers credit a deer management program – as well as using common sense – for an increase in the number of large deer over the last few years. Hunters seeking trophy deer come from Birmingham, Mobile, Montgomery, and Tuscaloosa to lease land from the family. Some restrictions are imposed on hunting, but Walter says they are more like recommendations than strict guidelines. They encourage the hunters to provide supplemental wildlife foods also, and ask them to keep observation sheets, of which reports are monitored annually.



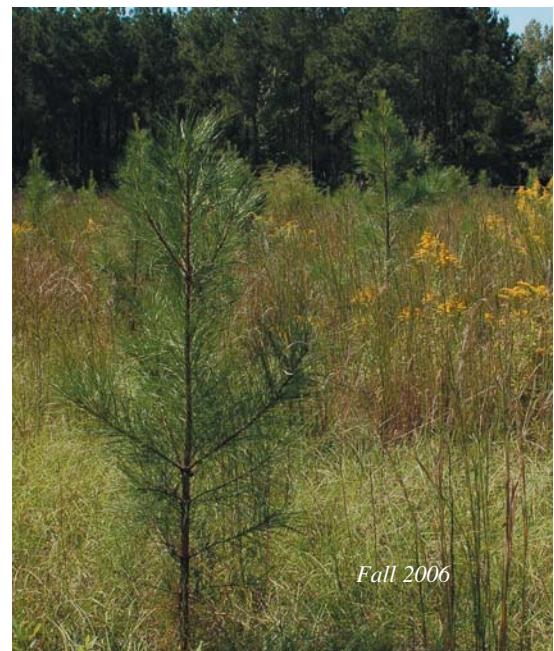
Just as their grandfather and father before them, the Tutt brothers say they and their families are “people of the land.” The family occasionally celebrates birthdays here at the landing, but whether or not there’s a party, it’s always a “holiday.” Adults sometimes come to the property to “get away,” although both grown-ups and children truly enjoy being out in the country. Webb says they often get here and don’t want to leave! Besides hunting, they participate in horseback riding and other pastimes. Big – and little – kids enjoy exploring on four wheelers and golf carts.

There are several ponds on the property; two are intensively managed for brim and bass. They feed the fish during summer months, but do not fertilize, primarily because the ponds are also used for swimming. Maintaining water quality is a high priority for the Tutts because the ponds and river are such a vital part of life at the farm. In addition to fishing and swimming, they enjoy skiing on the river. Boats remain in the water year round, providing an activity center not only for their children and friends, but also the hunters on the property.

While caring for the land is rewarding in itself, the Tutts also realize they have been entrusted with a great responsibility. They understand the importance of teaching how to tend the land – not only

to their own families, but to others as well. Walter commented, “We’re blessed with an opportunity to own property and be stewards,” adding that he felt that possibly one of their most important tasks is to educate children on sound management of the forests and water quality. To that end, they conduct forestry tours to offer lessons in timber management and harvesting. They have also hosted numerous other groups on the property, including church outings and Sunday School cookouts for both youth and adults. Boy Scouts come out to fish in the ponds and also observe deer and other wildlife in a natural setting, often for the very first time.

Always remembering the value of property and wildlife inspired by their parents, it is the goal of the Tutt brothers not only to pass on this land to the next generation, but the legacy of truly caring for and improving it as well. 🌲



(Left:) The tall pines in the distance are an example of the different ages of loblollies. (Right:) The Tutts are also experimenting with longleaf to determine its success.